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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest discusses civic education in U.S. schools in terms of: (1) its meaning; (2) its place in the curriculum; (3) its effects on learners; and (4) suggested methods of improving it. Civic education involves the development of skills in making decisions about public issues and participating in public affairs and encompasses the preservation of core democractic concepts and values. Civic education has become an established part of social studies curricula and has increased as a result of a national trend toward law-related education (LRE). However, evidence suggests that over one-half of young adults lack the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that lead to responsible citizenship. Improvements in civic education might be achieved through: (1) an increase in the number of courses and time spent on lessons and in the depth and breadth of topics; (2) classroom environments that are conducive to open and free exchanges of ideas; (3) the teaching of public affairs issues in history, government, and LRE classes; (4) increased student participation in extracurricular activities; (5) less authoritarian school environments; and (6) the use of LRE programs to foster student interaction, to present all facets of public issues, to involve resource persons and school administrators, and to encourage staff development. Seventeen references and ERIC resources are included. (JHP)

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CIVIC EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

by

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Civic Education in Schools

by John D. Hoge

Civic education was an important part of schooling in the United States during the early years of the republic. And so it is today. However, some advocates of civic education are concerned that its place in the curricula of schools may not be as solid and secure as it once was or should be. They join with R. Freeman Butts in his call "for revitalizing the historic civic mission of American education" (1988, 184). This ERIC Digest discusses civic education in American schools: (1) the meaning of it, (2) the place of it in the curriculum, (3) the effects of it on learners, and (4) the means for improving it.

What Is Civic Education? According to Butts, civic education "means explicit and continuing study of the basic concepts and values underlying our democratic political community and constitutional order" (1988, 184). Butts and others agree that civic education also involves development of skills in making decisions about public issues and participating in public affairs.

In a constitutional democracy, civic education is supposed to involve both preservation of core concepts and values and liberation from single-minded teaching and learning about them. There should be an effort to maintain the foundations of our constitutional order and to improve upon it through reflection, deliberation, and action. By contrast, civic education in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes emphasizes one-sided promotion of partisan views, with little opportunity for learners to develop capacities for independent thought and action.

How Is Civic Education Included in the Curricula of Schools? Civic education is an established part of the curriculum in social studies. Content in government, law, and citizenship is woven into the typical elementary school social studies program. During the 1980s, content in civics has increased at the expense of subject matter from the behavioral sciences.

Formal courses in civics and government are required for graduation from high school in more than thirty-five states; such courses are prevalent electives or local school-district requirements in states that do not require them for graduation. High school government courses are mostly offered at the twelfth grade. In addition, a ninth- or tenth-grade civics course is required for graduation in ten states and is a prevalent elective or school district requirement in thirteen states (Council of State Social Studies Specialists 1986).

Civic education in elementary and secondary schools has been boosted by the national trend toward law-related education (LRE). A nation-wide survey (Hahn 1985) reveals that, since 1975, LRE has been added to the curriculum in more than half of the forty-six states involved in the study. Respondents in this study (state-level curriculum specialists and supervisors) mentioned LRE more frequently than other topics as having been added to the social studies curriculum since 1975. They also ranked LRE fourth as a priority in social studies education; it ranked eleventh in 1975. Courses in LRE are widely offered as high school electives in more than twenty states.

Civic education is also a prominent part of most secondary school courses in American history. The Education for Democracy Project (1987) advocates strengthening the place of civics in high school history courses.

What Are the Effects on Learners of Civic Education in Schools? Despite a long-standing tradition of civic education in elementary and secondary schools, there is substantial evidence that more than half of young Americans lack knowledge, attitudes, and skills that leading civic educators believe they should have in order to be responsible citizens of a constitutional democracy. Most high school students and adults appear to lack detailed knowledge and understanding of institutions, principles, and processes of government in the United States. They also tend to have shallow or confounded conceptions of core ideas, such as constitutionalism, republicanism, democracy, and federalism (Sigel & Hoskin 1981; NAEP 1983; Hearst Corporation 1987). Finally, they seem to have shallow and inaccurate views about civics in American history; most 17-year-olds, for example, are unable to correctly answer questions about major events in the constitutional history of the United States (Ravitch & Finn 1987, 55-58).

The superficial knowledge that young Americans have about government, constitutional history, and law is reflected in their civic attitudes. Adolescents' attitudes toward democracy and constitutional government tend to be favorable in the abstract. However, their commitment to democratic attitudes is not consistently applied to unpopular individuals or ideas in particular cases. They seem to lack comprehension of the complexities of constitutional democracy, such as the delicate balance of majority rule with minority rights (Sigel & Hoskin 1981; Elam 1984).

Superficial and shallow commitment to civic attitudes and values of our representative democracy may be associated with the limited civic participation of most young adults, especially their low turnout as voters in public elections. Civic education in schools is supposed to develop propensities for and skills in political participation. However, Miller (1985) used data from longitudinal studies to show that there has been little or no relationship between civic education in secondary schools and the kind or amount of political participation of adults.

How Might Civic Education Be Improved? The civic learning of students in schools is dependent upon the substance, design, and manner of presentation of their lessons. Furthermore, the organization, operation, and culture of the school shape important aspects of students' civic education and its outcomes. The fol-

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lowing statements are based on research about how to improve civic education in schools.

1. Students' achievement of civic knowledge is related to the number of courses taken, the breadth and depth of topics studied, and the amount of time spent on lessons and homework (Mullis 1979; Parker & Kaltsounis 1986).

2. The development of democratic civic attitudes and values is enhanced by teachers who provide lessons on the analysis of public issues or controversial topics in a classroom environment that is conducive to the open and free exchange of ideas (Ehman 1980; Leming 1985).

3. One means to development of higher-order thinking skills associated with civic education is systematic teaching about public issues in school courses in history, government, and law-related education (Guyton 1984).

4. Student participation in extracurricular activities of the school is positively related to development of political efficacy and propensities for participation in civic life outside the school (Ehman 1980).

5. There may be a positive relationship between "democractic school climate" and development of democratic civic attitudes and behavior among students; less authoritarian climates are linked to more democratic political attitudes and behavior among students (Ehman 1980; Hepburn 1983).

6. Systematic and extensive exposure to law-related education appears to enhance learning of civic knowledge, attitudes, and skills when these programs

- foster interaction among students in the classroom;
- use realistic content that includes balanced treatment of civic issues;
- involve outside resource persons to augment classroom instruction and activities;
- receive enthusiastic support by the school principal and other school-district administrators;
- receive support through regular opportunities for staff development (Anderson 1987).

In conclusion, civic education in schools is important for the survival of our constitutional democracy. Effective civic education is the primary means for teaching and learning the democratic values that undergird our system of ordered liberty, which provides majority rule with protection of minority rights. However, assessments of civic learning suggest that our educational programs fall short of desired levels of achievement among a majority of learners. Thus, educators are challenged to seek and implement means to improve civic education in elementary and secondary schools.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) system and are available in microfiche and or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, write EDRS, 1900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304 or call 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (*Current Index to Journals in Education*), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using bibliographic information provided below.

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